In a dual presentation of Chinese art and culture past and present, the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces series at the National Gallery of Victoria presents China's ancient terracotta warriors alongside an exhibition of new works by one of the world's most exciting contemporary artists, Cai Guo-Qiang.

MAJOR PARTNER

ENTRANCE

01
WELCOME

Hello and welcome to the National Gallery of Victoria. Today, I am delighted to accompany you as we explore the rich culture of China, both ancient and contemporary.

Can you see birds flying overhead? These little birds will also accompany us on our journey today. In this corridor, you will also find some animated terracotta warriors. Have a look while I introduce the two exhibitions you will see today …

The first is titled *Terracotta Warriors: Guardians of Immortality* and it explores China's ancient past. A highlight of this exhibition is the display of terracotta warriors and terracotta horses. The warriors were discovered in 1974 in China's Shaanxi province. They were one of the great archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century and are often described as the eighth wonder of the world. The warriors were

created over two thousand years ago and they represent the armies of Qin Shihuang, First Emperor of China. The warriors were his ‘guardians of immortality’ – they were designed to protect the First Emperor in the afterlife.

This is the second visit of the warriors to the NGV. In an historic exhibition from 1982, the gallery presented the very first major exhibition outside China of the then newly discovered Terracotta Warriors.

This time, the warriors are accompanied by an extraordinary presentation of more than one-hundred-and-seventy treasures from ancient China. These are on loan from museums and archaeological sites in Shaanxi province. These priceless artefacts span more than one-thousand-two-hundred years of Chinese history. Together with the Terracotta Warriors, they give incredible insight into the

formative years of Chinese civilisation.

Today, you will also see a second exhibition presented in parallel. The exhibition *The Transient Landscape* features the work of Cai Guo-Qiang, one of the world's most significant contemporary artists. Cai will premiere five new large-scale artworks, commissioned by the NGV especially for this exhibition. The gunpowder paintings you will see today were produced here in this country.

In his art, Chinese-born Cai fuses today's global concerns with ideas drawn from Chinese artistic and philosophical traditions. In this unprecedented pairing, the gallery has invited Cai to reflect directly on the legacy of ancient China and the Terracotta Warriors. For Cai, the chance to create a dialogue between ancient and modern was an enticing notion. The two exhibitions bring together, as Cai said, 'two rivers of time separated by two

millennia'. There are two exhibitions but, in Cai's words, they 'exert mutual influence'. He continued, 'The ancient and the contemporary – two surges of energy that crisscross, pull, interact, and complement each other, generating a powerful tension and contrast, each attracting and resisting the other'.

I hope you enjoy this opportunity to immerse in the cultural richness of China. See you in the next room.

RITUAL OBJECTS AND ANCESTRAL TREASURES

02

RITUAL AND CEREMONY IN ANCIENT CHINA

Music was important to ancient China. ‘Music’, said Confucius, ‘produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without’.

This room contains artefacts from early Chinese dynasties, including the time of Confucius. The wonderful diversity of forms and aesthetics reflects the great cultural diversity of China before and after unification by the First Emperor Qin Shihuang.

A key theme in this room is the critical role that ritual and ceremony played in ancient China, and music was an essential component. This *bo* bell is a prestigious object – you can see by its ornate decoration and precious materiality. Look at the way the decoration flames out to create a kind of halo effect. This *bo* bell belonged to Duke Wu. He was a powerful ruler from the Qin family and thus an ancestor of the First Emperor. The bell

may have been used for musical entertainments in his court, as well as for more serious ceremonial functions. It is decorated with a beautiful *panhui* pattern: if you look closely, the stylised design will reveal the shapes of auspicious mythical horned dragons and serpents. The presence of these supernatural creatures reminds us that both the natural and the supernatural worlds were very much in coexistence for the ancient Chinese. Have a look around ...

Many objects in this room were created during a time of great political and social instability. Some artefacts date from the Spring and Autumn period. During this time, more than one-hundred-and-seventy different factions jostled for power. Other objects relate to the subsequent Warring States period. By that time, the territories had been consolidated under seven warring states, one

of which was the Qin. The Qin would produce the First Emperor.

It was during the turbulent Spring and Autumn period that Confucius developed his ideas. The Confucian belief system would go on to exert enduring influence for more than two thousand years. Confucian ideas are still influential today.

In a time of unrest, Confucius sought to restore peace. Some of his fundamental principles for a harmonious society included: respect for elders and ancestors; loyalty to family; acceptance of one's place in society; and correct and virtuous behavior. This room contains many decorative bronze vessels known as *ding*, *gui* and *hu*. Such vessels were used to give offerings to the gods or to worship the ancestors.

Confucius also believed in the Mandate from Heaven, or *tian ming*. Through this

ancient belief, Chinese rulers legitimised their right to rule. Through the *tian ming*, a ruler became the earthly representative of the deities; the mandate decreed that the *tian* (or deity) and king were indistinguishable. Consequently, the emperor became the ruler of 'all under heaven'. The philosopher Mencius said, 'He who holds the Mandate of Heaven must stand in the centre of the kingdom and tranquilise the people within the four seas'. Rulers invoked the mandate through elaborate rituals.

The objects here evidence the sophisticated skills of Chinese artisans. You will see several objects featuring jade. The Chinese considered jade a stone of great purity with potent life-preserving powers. For this reason, it often featured in funerary objects. Jade objects would have been placed on or around the body during burial to

preserve it on its journey to its afterlife. Today, jade disks known as *bi* are still found in Chinese homes, a symbol of wealth, longevity and good health.

One last thing … don't miss the small sculpture of a tiger mother lovingly holding a cub in her mouth. This charming and extremely rare artefact is one of the oldest in the exhibition. It was likely created as a special offering to the gods: tigers were regarded as highly exotic animals.

To finish, I'll leave you with a well-known Confucian quote: 'It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop'.

RITUAL OBJECTS AND ANCESTRAL TREASURES

03

CAI GUO-QIANG – FLOW (CYPRESS)

Here is a work titled *Flow (Cypress)* by Cai Guo-Qiang. You are looking at an infusion of gunpowder ignitions captured on paper. Cai has created the foliage through scattering gunpowder, which is then ignited. See how the singe marks have created shapes reminiscent of cypress foliage? He then completes the tree trunks using his hands and fingers.

The cypress is a venerable tree in Chinese culture. It has long been associated with longevity, resilience and steadfastness. Confucius said of it: 'When the year turns cold, pines and cypresses reveal their persistent green'. The cypress is often treasured for being ancient; some legends tell of trees that have endured for thousands of years. As symbols of longevity, cypress forests are often planted around tombs. The Tang dynasty poet Du Fu wrote a poem titled

Ballad of the Ancient Cypress which has the lines: Before Kongming's shrine stands an ancient cypress, Its branches are like green bronze, its roots just like stone.

Have a look at this artwork while I tell you about Cai's use of gunpowder … Since 1989, Cai has frequently employed gunpowder to make artworks. These works exist as events, such as the spectacular fireworks he created to open the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, he also creates images from igniting gunpowder and capturing the residue on a medium such as silk or paper. That is the process behind *Flow*, here.

Do you know that gunpowder was a Chinese invention? The Chinese name – *huoyao* – translates as 'medicine of fire'. Discovered around AD 850, gunpowder was a by-product of the quest for immortality. Alchemists were seeking an elixir to give

eternal life and they discovered the properties of gunpowder.

For Cai, gunpowder is a complex material which straddles dualities: it is both ancient and modern; material and immaterial; creative and destructive; momentary and eternal. The moment of ignition is a critical one. As Cai says, 'This momentary flash contains eternity. Its impact is both physical and spiritual.'

To Cai, gunpowder is both a creative and destructive force. This echoes the Taoist belief that there can be creation in destruction. The dualities in gunpowder are important to the artist. The notion of opposing forces is commensurate with traditional Chinese beliefs. As Cai says: the destructive potential of something that could be equally pregnant with constructive power, creative power, and healing power, that is very interesting to me … We say in Chinese, and English as well, that

there is always something that will counterbalance something else – using poison against poison, for instance, or fighting fire with fire – and in this same material you have both sides, opposing but embodied in one.

IMPERIAL AND DAILY LIFE OF THE QIN DYNASTY

04

THE FIRST EMPEROR AND THE UNIFICATION OF CHINA

This display case contains artefacts from the First Emperor's ambitious program of standardisation that was initiated across the whole of China. Can you see a Qin state bronze coin? This was part of the single monetary system for all China he initiated. There is also a measuring vessel for grain and liquids that was part of a program of standardising lengths, volumes and weights. As well as money and measurements, the Qin standardised language. A common Chinese writing system was established, which remains the base for written Chinese. Dress codes were introduced. This process across China was a powerful strategy. You can imagine not only the great administrative efficiencies it afforded but also the way it encouraged diverse people to unify under the one nation.

This room focuses on the Qin dynasty. The

Qin was one of the shortest dynasties, lasting only fourteen years, however, it was arguably the most significant in Chinese history. The word ‘China’ is derived from the word ‘Qin’. It was the Qin that unified China, creating the nation as we understand it today.

Have a look around while I tell you about the rise of the Qin dynasty … The Qin family long dreamed of imperial conquest. The political strategist Li Si wrote how each Qin ruler wanted, as he said, ‘to swallow up the world, to call himself emperor and rule it’. Initially, the Qin occupied a small state but, as Confucius said, ‘its resolution was great’. Over generations, Qin rulers extended their power. The early Han historian Sima Qian wrote how the Qin devoured their enemies ‘as a silkworm devours a mulberry leaf’.

The future First Emperor of China was born in 259 BCE with the name Ying Zheng. At the

age of thirteen, Zheng unexpectedly became king of the Qin kingdom. Over decades, King Zheng's military power grew until he was a force to be reckoned with. Li Si said to the ascendant king:

Now the feudal lords are so submissive to Qin … With the power the Qin possesses and Your Majesty's worth, it would be as easy to wipe out the feudal lords, found an imperial dynasty and unite the whole world under one rule as it would to dust the top of an oven!

It was probably not as easy as cleaning the oven but, nonetheless, by 221 BCE when he was thirty-eight, King Zheng had indeed swallowed up all the territories. He united all the lands of China and proclaimed himself China's First Emperor.

On becoming emperor, Zheng took the name Qin Shihuangdi; Qin from his kingdom, Shi meaning first and Huangdi, a reference to

the famed Yellow Emperor. Although highly improbable, the First Emperor declared himself a descendant of the legendary Yellow Emperor, Huangdi, from the third millennium BCE. Essentially, the First Emperor was connecting himself to auspicious ancestry to further legitimise his right to rule and to establish his mandate from heaven.

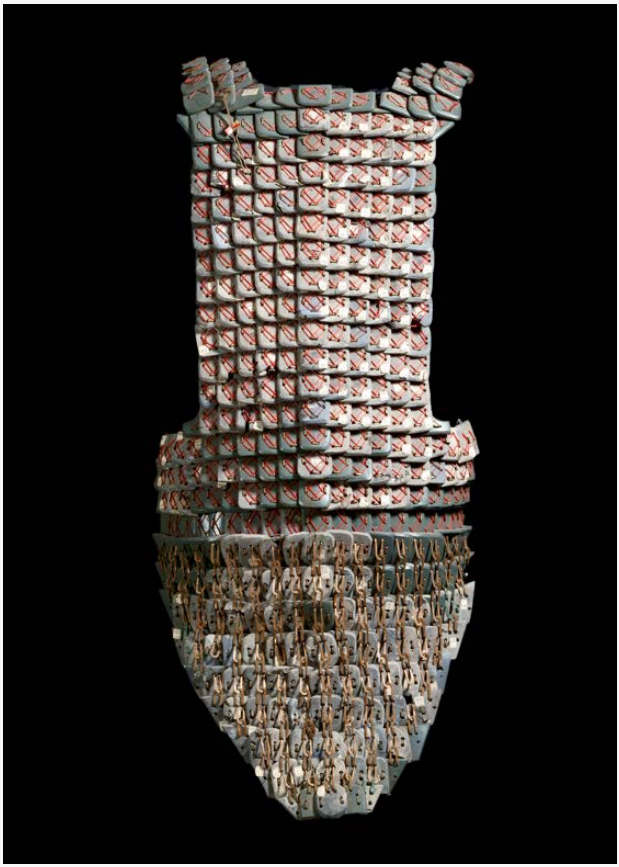
When in power, the First Emperor initiated vast public works. For instance, he built imperial highways across the length and breadth of China. This enabled the vast lands of China to be easily accessed and governed by officials. The Qin had highly effective strategies for centralising governance. They brought together disparate lands with diverse customs, languages and systems into one well-organised and centralised system.

The First Emperor positioned himself as China's glorious imperial emperor with a

divine right to rule. To advertise his achievements, the First Emperor positioned stone tablets with inscriptions at significant ritual sites across the country. One said:

He has regulated and standardised laws and measures, and the rules which service for all people. He has also clarified the duties of men … All under heaven are of one mind and are united in will … Wherever the steps of men reach there is no-one who does not declare himself a subject. His glory surpasses that of the five emperors.

IMPERIAL AND DAILY LIFE OF THE QIN DYNASTY



05

QIN SHIHUANG – A VOICE LIKE A JACKAL AND A HEART LIKE A WOLF

A group of objects here attest to the First Emperor's military strength and sophistication, such as this remarkable helmet and suit of armour. So far, eighty-seven sets of body armour have been excavated as well as forty-three helmets and one set of horse armour. Currently, only four per cent of the site has been excavated. It is speculated that the total number of sets of armour may exceed six thousand, equivalent in number to the Terracotta Army.

Each set of body armour consists of approximately six hundred pieces of crafted stone and weighs up to twenty-five kilograms. These were found arranged on wooden stands. They seem not to have been produced for practical use. It may appear amazing but the armour were not intended for real battle; they were produced for the First Emperor's afterlife. Throughout his reign, he

was mindful of both his earthly life and his spiritual afterlife. As well as taking meticulous care over worldly matters like land taxes, irrigation and defence systems, he was equally attentive to his immortal life to come. Qin Shihuang began construction of his tomb part way during his reign as King Zheng of the Qin Kingdom. This was expected; the *Liji* or *Book of Rites* stated that when 'a ruler succeeds to his state, he makes his coffin'.

Near here, you will see a case containing arrowheads. More than forty thousand such arrowheads have been found at the site of the Terracotta Warriors. Many were in bundles of around one hundred that were thought to be the number of arrows in quivers held by warriors. These bronze arrows are a remarkable manufacturing achievement. To produce the ultimate arrowhead, the Qin metalsmiths employed imaginative

techniques. The triangular tips were produced with a higher component of tin, which enabled them to be polished to a sharp edge. By contrast, the shaft was produced with a higher component of copper, which made it flexible and less prone to cracking. This ingenious hybrid technique enabled an arrow of superior strength and sharpness.

The First Emperor was a strongman ruler. This was his nature. Here is the military strategist Wei Liao's description of him:

The King of Qin has a large nose, broad eyes and the chest of a bird of prey; he has a voice like a jackal; he's not very kind to others, with the heart of a tiger or a wolf. When he finds himself in a difficult situation, it's easy for him to be humble to others but when he achieves his aim he will just as easily devour men.

Well, I consider myself warned about this treacherous man.

The First Emperor rewarded might and allegiance. For instance, the Qin developed a system whereby soldiers applied for promotion based on the number of enemy severed heads they had collected in battle. This was an era of great battles; it was not unusual for hundreds of thousands of men to participate in a single battle.

The First Emperor surrounded himself with skilful but ruthless politicians. One of his key statesmen was Shang Yang. Lord Shang was a legal scholar who established a punitive regime of law and order. He instituted a policy of joint responsibility for crimes. If one person committed a crime, the whole family would suffer the punishment. Lord Shang may have lived to regret his merciless policies. After the death of the First Emperor, Shang fell foul of

the new regime. He was sentenced to death by *juliè* – that was dismemberment by being fastened to five horses and torn to pieces. His whole family were also executed.

TERRACOTTA WARRIORS: GUARDIANS OF IMMORTALITY

06

TERRACOTTA WARRIORS

You have reached the hall of the Terracotta Warriors. This one is an Armoured General. He is the most high-ranking of all the warriors here. You'll see a range of military men of different ranks and styles, usually in poses that support weaponry. You'll also see a civil official – he is in a rather more amicable pose. Have an explore and I'll tell you about the discovery of the Terracotta Warriors and their role within the Army …

In 1974, some farmers were digging an irrigation well in a persimmon and pomegranate orchard. First, they found some fragments of pottery. Then, they unearthed a terracotta head – its eyes looked at them alarmingly! By chance, they had struck upon one of the world's greatest archaeological discoveries: a huge army that was protecting the tomb of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang. It is estimated that there are more than six

thousand such warriors – isn't that incredible?

The First Emperor's mausoleum is a vast site that ranges over kilometres. The Terracotta Army is an important part of the overall mausoleum. It is sited around one-and-a-half kilometres from the First Emperor's burial mound. The site of the Terracotta Army is still only partly excavated and his tomb is completely unexcavated with no current plans to open it.

Each warrior usually consists of seven different parts: a plinth, feet, legs, torso, arms, hands and head. The clay was kneaded by foot and then shaped either through a coil layering technique or by pressing soft clay into moulds. The warriors were given an individualised appearance through the use of different moulds and by manipulating the position of fingers and arms while the clay was still soft. Once the torso was formed,

folds of clothing or armour plates were then added and, in a similar manner to a theatre make-up artist, head features were created with additional clay to define the cheekbones, chin, ears, nose and hair.

The head, hands and body were made separately and then transported to a kiln to be fired. Workers were held personally responsible for the quality of the work. They were obliged to sign their names on parts they made and were punished if a part was substandard. Not surprisingly, an outstanding standard of quality control was maintained.

Initially, the figures were brightly coloured. The faces were painted in flesh tones with dark brown hair and eyes. Some had eyelashes delicately brushed in. The warriors wore clothes in tints of red, blue, green, yellow, purple and white. Often different colours were used for the pants, tunics and

collars – so each warrior could seem quite multicoloured. Imagine walking through subterranean corridors flanked by thousands of warriors with lifelike faces and vivid clothing. What a resplendent sight!

The logistics required to build the overall mausoleum are nothing short of mind-boggling. Sima Qian records that seven hundred thousand workers were involved in building the mausoleum. Much forced labour was contributed by prisoners and convicts. However, it's also thought that the First Emperor compelled all citizens to annually devote one month's labour to the project. The kingdom's excellence in bureaucracy enabled them to require all citizens to forcibly relocate for short-term projects. This would have been done at non-harvest times. The First Emperor completed many vast public works in this manner.

The First Emperor was obsessed with immortality. Sima Qian records that Qin Shihuang hated any conversation about death; his officials were afraid to raise the concept with him. He constantly sought elixirs that would guarantee eternal life. In fact, it was on a quest for immortality that the First Emperor died. Sima Qian wrote that: ‘He followed the coastline in the hope of finding the wonderful medicine of immortality of the three holy mountains in the middle of the sea. But he did not find it.’ On this journey, the First Emperor succumbed to illness. He was fifty years old and had ruled as First Emperor for eleven years. His mausoleum, though grand, was not fully complete.

TERRACOTTA WARRIORS: GUARDIANS OF IMMORTALITY

07

FROM HUMAN AND ANIMAL SACRIFICE TO SYMBOLIC OBJECTS

The horse features prominently in the First Emperor's mausoleum. Horses were hugely significant for work and warfare in ancient China. The two terracotta horses here are examples of those found in teams of four that pulled chariots. The chariot represented a unit of around one hundred soldiers clustered around a wooden chariot. It was an essential component in the Terracotta Army's combat formation. The chariots have disintegrated but the horses and chariot riders have remained. Have a look around this section …

The First Emperor's mausoleum complex was intended to be his home in the afterlife. Consequently, the mausoleum was, in many ways, a replica of Qin Shihuang's life on earth. Although some parts remain unexcavated, the First Emperor's mausoleum is believed to incorporate a beautiful palace, court attendants, quarters for his senior advisers,

stocks of grain and animals, stables for horses, hunting grounds and water parks, musical instruments and acrobats, and – of course – a vast and powerful army.

The excavations have uncovered both model objects – such as terracotta men and horses – as well as real people and animals. This is quite a curious combination – let me describe why this is the case.

The Qin continued the ancient practice of human and animal sacrifice. Their ceremonies included ritual offerings to the gods that sometimes required the slaughter of hundreds of cattle, sheep and pigs. In line with this, excavations at the First Emperor's mausoleum have uncovered the skeletons of animals such as horses, birds and deer. Furthermore, human remains have been discovered at the mausoleum. Female remains excavated from near the tomb are presumed to be those of

non-child-bearing concubines. Male remains found alongside the skeletons of horses in stable quarters are presumed to be those of stable hands and grooms. The graves of enforced labourers have also been found. Sima Qian records how, as he wrote, 'all those who had worked as craftsmen and artisans to store the treasures were shut in the tomb, unable to leave'.

Sima Qian described the practice of human sacrifice as 'those who follow the dead'. It is an ambiguous term: if someone believed absolutely in a resplendent afterlife, then perhaps we can understand a compulsion to follow the emperor into death. Nonetheless, a famous ancient poem from the *Book of Odes* titled *Huang Niao*, or *Yellow Birds*, tells a different story. The poem mournfully recounts the slaying of three accomplished brothers who were ordered to

die with Duke Mu of Qin in 621 BCE, probably by ritual suicide. The poem not only describes regret at the loss of their great expertise but also describes the brothers' terror at their fate. Each brother was described as being 'alive to awful death consigned'. This terrible line is repeated three times, once for each brother: 'When to the yawning grave he came, Terror unnerved and shook his frame'.

The mausoleum was a replica of the First Emperor's actual life, however, it was also designed to function spiritually and symbolically. The mausoleum primarily held a ceremonial function: it was a model designed to transport the First Emperor into his afterlife. Over time, the burial of living beings seemed ill-suited to this ceremony. Real and living objects were seen to be incompatible with the spirit world. For one thing, it was a waste to sacrifice real objects and animals that could

be used in the earthly realm. In time, real objects were substituted by mock objects that operated symbolically, such as clay warriors rather than real men.

This section includes a replica of the two half-size bronze chariots and horses excavated from just beside Qin Shihuang's burial tomb mound. It is a perfect scale model. This scale was deemed adequate because the chariot was destined to be used by spirits in the afterlife, not corporeal humans on earth. As the *Liji* stated, 'That the bones and flesh should return to the earth is what is appointed. But the soul in its energy can go everywhere.

CAI GUO-QIANG – MURMURATION (LANDSCAPE)

08

CAI GUO-QIANG – MURMURATION (LANDSCAPE)

Have you seen birds form a murmuration? That's when many birds flock together and behave as one agile grouping. They duck and dive with incredible speed, creating one of nature's most spectacular sights.

Here, Cai Guo-Qiang creates a murmuration from ten thousand porcelain birds. The birds were created in many differently shaped moulds in Dehua, a town in China near Cai's hometown that is renowned for its centuries-old tradition of porcelain crafts. In Australia, Cai then exposed the white porcelain birds to gunpowder ignitions, which created the darkened patina.

The great mass of birds here echoes the great mass of Terracotta Warriors buried to protect the First Emperor. It is thought that up to seven thousand warriors were buried with him, all arranged in sophisticated military formation. Here, Cai responds with ten

thousand birds arranged in a murmuration. The birds are also arranged in a three-dimensional composition reminiscent of Mount Li, the auspicious site chosen by the First Emperor for his tomb.

See how the birds cut a black swathe through the white gallery space? This form is reminiscent of the ancient Chinese tradition of *shuimòhuà*, or brush and ink painting, in which black brushstrokes enliven a white ground. Rather than focus on realistic representation, the stylised black brushstrokes are an effort to capture spirit or essence. The black form is regarded as a trace of energy that gives life and motion to the subject. Cai grew up watching his father practise such artforms, which have long been associated with the Chinese literati. Cai's artworks very consciously blend ancient Chinese aesthetics and philosophies with

those drawn from contemporary art and conceptual art. He actively encourages this cross-pollination.

Have a look around while I tell you about Cai Guo-Qiang's background … You can stroll around and admire the birds – as if you were in a park!

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou in China's Fujian Province. He grew up under the regime of Chairman Mao. Cai has said: 'Mao's concepts do subconsciously and consciously seep into my mentality'. However, Cai has also described Quanzhou as a cosmopolitan town that enjoyed shelter from the more devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution.

Cai's family was cultured and artistic. He said: When I was little, trails of Quanzhou literati used to come to our house and recite books, paint, and do calligraphy … Back then,

everyone had very little, but my father was the kind of man who would spend anything he could spare on his passion for the arts. Thus, our house became a literary salon, and I grew up in an intellectual environment.

As a young man, Cai studied stage design at Shanghai Theatre Academy. In 1986, he moved to Japan. There, over the next decade, he first established himself as an artist. During this time, he undertook his first gunpowder works. Japan's rich aesthetic and philosophical traditions exerted strong influence on him, as did the Korean artist Lee Ufan and the Mono-ha – or School of Things – movement. This school emphasised the interdependence of things and their environment. It also emphasised Asian philosophy as a way to approach avant-garde art practice, rather than the dominant Euro-American ideas. This led to practices

described as ‘Asia as method’ in which artists in countries such as Japan and China looked to Eastern principles as fertile ground for innovation, rather than align with the dominant models.

Cai currently lives in New York but he is a truly itinerant global artist. He continually relocates to different countries to undertake projects and residencies.

Part of Cai’s artistic and personal ethos is a determination to challenge our assumptions. This includes working beyond conventional dichotomies. For instance, he freely employs both ancient and contemporary ideas and techniques, refusing the assumption that tradition and modernity are locked in opposition to one another. He demands freedom from such socially constructed boundaries. In Cai’s words:

One time, someone gave me a form to fill

out. The questions on this form were, ‘What is a Chinese artist? What is an Asian artist? What is an international artist? What is a contemporary artist? And what is a traditional artist?’ And for all of these answers, I wrote: ‘It’s me. This is what I am’. Our times have given us the opportunity to be able to say that we belong to every category. We are free to be whatever we want.

In the next stop, you can see footage of the making and installation of *Murmuration* done here in Australia.

This is a video stop. After the video has played, tap home to continue reading.

CAI GUO-QIANG – MURMURATION (LANDSCAPE)

09

THE MAKING OF MURMURATION (LANDSCAPE)

CAI GUO-QIANG – TRANSIENCE (PEONY)

10

CAI GUO-QIANG – TRANSIENCE (PEONY)

This room is a celebration of the peony flower. In China, the peony is regarded as the ‘King of Flowers’. These beautiful flowers have featured in Chinese art since ancient times as symbols of virtue, honour and prosperity. Here, Cai explores the peony in two forms. Around you is a 360-degree mural made from gunpowder on silk. In a composition with patches of brilliant colour, Cai charts the peony flower through the emergence of the bud, the flower in bloom, then the wilt and eventual decay of the flower. Cai often uses a circular form to display his work. In Chinese cosmology, the sky is round and the circle represents limitlessness and completeness. Here, the loop around you is symbolic of eternity, so the motif of the peony in a circular formation is a kind of double layering of symbols representing prosperity and immortality.

The centrepiece of this room is an installation of delicate porcelain flowers that have been exposed to coloured gunpowder ignitions – a close look will reveal colours such as pink and blue. Notice also how the peonies are clustered in the form of a mountain? They represent the shape of Mount Li. The First Emperor placed his immortal home at the foot of this mountain. Mountains are sacred in classical Chinese belief of *feng shui*. The mountain is regarded as a point in the physical world in which the earthly and the heavenly meet. Have a look around …

Cai's art encourages us to think about the forces of energy and the spiritual realm. He has said, 'I have a lot of curiosity about unseen force[s] and invisible things'. Growing up, Cai was very close to his grandmother. She taught him ancient Chinese myths and practices and would take him to a shaman if

he was ill. This sparked an enduring respect for Chinese practices such as Chinese medicine, *feng shui* and *qi gong* – practices that contemplate unseen forces of energy.

One of the reasons Cai is drawn to gunpowder is for its ability to visualise energy. 'Gun powder', he has said, 'is a visible means to portray energy, which is invisible'. He also appreciates its 'spontaneity and unpredictability'. He has described gunpowder as a way to, as he said, 'usher in that invisible power, the "Great Invisible Master Artist" as it were'. Gunpowder is indeed a highly unpredictable material and Cai's works have not always succeeded as planned. In 1982, in Australia, for instance, the gunpowder stores in the factory exploded, forcing the cancellation of a major work.

The notion of energy is central to traditional Chinese philosophies and medicine. Energy is

often described as *qi* – or vital life force. *Qi* is never expended; rather, it is in a state of endless transformation. As Cai says: No matter how extraordinary an event is, it is also nothing extraordinary. No matter how transitory life is, it is also infinite. No matter how lacking in energy, there is still energy. Impossibility is still possibility. Because energy is infinite, no one is capable of using it up. Understanding this allows the self to be relaxed and free, at one with the universe.

JOURNEY TO THE AFTERLIFE: A HAN DYNASTY TOMB

11

BEYOND THE QIN DYNASTY

As you pass by these mythological beasts, you move from the Qin dynasty to the Han dynasty. You will also – at least, symbolically – be entering the afterlife.

This is a gate to a Han tomb. Just like Qin tombs, they were also placed underground, sometimes plumbing depths of up to six storeys with a large burial mound built on top. There, deep underground, lay magnificent quarters that would enable the emperor to dwell in luxury forever.

Are you nervously eyeing the beasts as I speak? I should hope so. The avenues leading to tomb gates were usually flanked by large mythical beasts. They add a potent sense of cosmological significance. They are also a bit scary – perfect for fending off evil spirits and marauding humans.

Have a look around while I tell you about the dynastic change from Qin to Han … After

passing between the beasts and in front of the gate, I suggest you turn left into the Han gallery.

Within four years after the First Emperor's death, the Qin rulers were vanquished by the Han. Let me tell you this sorry tale …

The First Emperor's firstborn son, Fusu, may have been a good ruler – he showed qualities of integrity and benevolence. However, he was tricked by Qin Shihuang's eighteenth son, Qin Ershi or Huhai. After the First Emperor's death, Huhai and two senior officials faked a decree in the First Emperor's name that proclaimed Huhai the successor and ordered Fusu to commit suicide. In an act of supreme filial duty, Fusu fulfilled the order, clearing the way for the devious Huhai to ascend the throne. When he became Second Emperor, taking the title Qin Ershi, he was twenty-one years of age. This cruel and

arrogant ruler presided over a despotic regime that lasted only three years. He was followed by the Third Emperor who ruled for only forty-six days.

In time, the tyrannical regimes of the Qin emperors were subject to increasingly frequent challenges. One of the most forceful rebellions was led by the peasant Chen She. He assembled a motley band of peasants with rudimentary weapons to challenge the imperial force of the Qin. Jia Yi wrote: 'the whole world gathered around Chen She like a cloud and answered him like an echo, loading provisions onto their shoulders and following him like a shadow'. The need for change was clearly in the air.

The Qin dynasty was ultimately overturned by the rebel leader Xiang Yu and former Qin officer Liu Bang. Liu Bang became the first Han emperor. He adopted the title Emperor

Gaozu of Han. A contemporary described how Liu Bang came from ‘the humblest beginnings to correct a discordant age and turn it back to right’.

It is generally agreed, then and now, that the Qin’s own failings led to their downfall. The Qin ruled by fear and suppression and they stifled free thinking. On one occasion, the First Emperor ordered the burning of all books in private possession, except for those on agriculture and medicine. This attempt to suppress free thought led to criticism from intellectuals. One passage written by Sima Qian describes how the First Emperor once ordered more than four-hundred-and-sixty scholars under suspicion of anti-Qin sentiment to be buried alive. This was one decree that Fusu, to his credit, tried to stop. Another factor in the Qin empire’s downfall was economic overreach; the enormous

program of construction works, including the mausoleum, overstretched the Qin.

Sima Qian summed it up by saying, ‘Qin failed in goodness and the great leaders rose to vex it. If Qin could have loved its people, then the Qin dynasty could have lasted not only three but thousands of generations.’

JOURNEY TO THE AFTERLIFE: A HAN DYNASTY TOMB

12

THE HAN DYNASTY AND ‘PERPETUAL PEACE’

Here are some Han versions of Terracotta Warriors. They are very different to the Qin version, aren't they?

These figures are around a third the size of the Qin warriors. They also seem humbler and less fierce. These clay figures initially had wooden arms, which could swivel in the shoulder socket. They would also have been vividly painted or dressed in clothes made from fabric and leather.

The long period of Han rule encompassed twenty-four emperors and one empress dowager. Two Han mausoleum sites have been excavated, which have contained thousands of Terracotta Warriors ready to defend their ruler in the afterlife.

This gallery contains artefacts from two Han tombs. These tombs are located around thirty kilometres from the First Emperor's mausoleum. The objects here were made

around seventy years after those from the First Emperor's tomb.

As you have seen, the Qin tomb was absolutely grandiose. It reflected the emperor's sense of omnipotence and unbridled power. The Han rulers also built imperial mausoleums, however, they expressed a preference for a more modest scale of tomb and style of tomb ware – you can see that here. Have a look around while I tell you more about the Han …

The Han Empire prevailed for more than four centuries. It was China's longest lasting dynasty. It oversaw a time of relative peace and prosperity, which became China's great classical age.

As you have heard, the first Han emperor was a peasant and a former Qin officer, called Liu Bang. Stories tell that, even as a child, he seemed marked for greatness. When his

mother became pregnant with him, Liu Bang's father saw a dragon hovering over her. As an adult, his shadow would sometimes form the silhouette of a dragon. Some thought he even looked like a dragon, with a high nose, whiskers and beard.

An event remembered as the *Uprising of the Slaying of the White Serpent* tells of Liu Bang's destiny. Here is what happened. Liu Bang was actually taking a group of convicts to Mount Li to work on the First Emperor's mausoleum when some of the men escaped. This loss of convicts was an offence punishable by death. Fearing for his life, Liu Bang let the other convicts go and became a fugitive himself. Some were moved by his actions and decided to follow him. The group was then accosted by a gigantic white serpent with poisonous breath. The group were afraid but Liu Bang charged on and slayed the

serpent. A weeping old woman then appeared by the roadside. When they asked why she was crying, she uttered words that foretold Liu Bang’s destiny. She said, ‘My child, the White Emperor's son, has been slain by the son of the Red Emperor’. She then mysteriously disappeared. After this auspicious event, people began to follow him.

The Han leaders learned from the Qin. They continued many of the great Qin innovations, such as efficient bureaucracy, unification and standardisation. However, the Han were more benevolent rulers. They practised compassion for the people and were frugal compared to the grandiose visions of the Qin emperors.

In the Han regime, farming and agriculture thrived. This gallery contains charming models of farm animals such as roosters, pigs, cows and goats. Don’t miss the model

pigsty, complete with suckling piglets. There is also a miniature granary, a well and a stove. The Han continued to reject the practice of human and animal sacrifice; they believed that replica versions would suffice for their immortal life. As you can see, the Han were no less thorough in their provisions for the afterlife, they just produced in scale model.

Where the Qin had suppressed free thought, the Han supported learning. It instituted an official education system and also established a national university, the Grand Academy, which grew to an annual cohort of thirty thousand students. They studied Chinese classics, history, literature, technological innovation and philosophy.

Emperor Gaozu established a new capital. He called it Chang'an, or 'perpetual peace', and it became the largest in the world for its time. Chang'an was sophisticated, urbane

and cultured, a city celebrated in Han poetry for endless pleasures. Some of this cosmopolitan sophistication and lifestyle is evident in the relief carvings on the Han tomb gate and these beautifully decorated and crafted objects. During the Han dynasty, arts and crafts flourished, favouring an aesthetic style that emphasised simplicity, modesty and elegance.

Now, make your way to the final room of the exhibition where you will find Cai's last gunpowder work, *Pulse (Mountain)*. The next stop is a video interview with him filmed in Australia. You may like to sit down and watch it in the next room.

This is a video stop. After the video has played, tap home to continue reading.

CAI GUO-QIANG – PULSE (MOUNTAIN)

13
CAI GUO-QIANG'S GUNPOWDER WORKS

CAI GUO-QIANG – PULSE (MOUNTAIN)

14
TEN THOUSAND AGES COME AND GO

This vast composition describes the landscape of China's central plains, or *Zhong Yuan*. It was over this landscape that many developments crucial to Chinese culture and history took place. It was here, for instance, in the third millennium BCE that the mythical Yellow Emperor first dreamed of unifying China. On these lands, the philosophy of Taoism was developed, along with key Chinese ideas such as Yin and Yang. And, it was here that Qin Shihuang achieved the dream to become First Emperor of China.

The crisscrossing lines in this work are also reminiscent of the complex circulation systems in our body. They also remind me of the complex flows of water in a landscape and pulses of energy reaching out from a central spirit. Such ideas are reflected in the Chinese name for this work, *Dimai*, or 'veins of the earth'. The First Emperor used processes of

water divination to choose the most auspicious site for his tomb. Have a look around …

In the centuries-old history of Chinese art, landscape painting was long regarded as the most venerable form. In the ancient *Shan shui* tradition of landscape painting, artists have created sublime views of nature in a potent fusion of Chinese aesthetics and Taoist philosophy. *Shan shui* means 'mountain-water', so named because the compositions often featured mountains, waterfalls and rivers. Cai's work here is a contribution to this landscape tradition. From our perspective, the work also recalls the large-scale action paintings of the Modernist artist Jackson Pollock or a work from 1960s Land and Environmental Art, such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped coast*.

Cai's work often encourages us to think

expansively about life and time. He asks us to think beyond our own frame of reference, to imagine ourselves as part of the infinitely transforming energy or *qi* of the universe. In his words: … humans are originally part of the universe – our physical nature and our inner intelligence were born along with it. We are shot through with memories of the universe's foetal moments as it came into being. We can perceive the past in the very core of our souls, and thus on a deeper level we have insight into our future …

This is the last stop. Thank you for visiting today and spending time with me as we explored China, both ancient and contemporary. As you leave, don't miss the video footage of Cai's gunpowder works being created. It was shot by the NGV's Multimedia Team.

To finish, as you explore this last work by

Cai, I will recite a classical Chinese poem. Dating from the Han period, this poem ruminates on the long afterlife, urging us to embrace our corporeal existence. The poem features symbols we have explored today, such as the cypress. The 'Yellow Springs' refers to the subterranean land of the dead – which is, after all, where you have just been.

I drive my carriage from the Upper East Gate,
scanning the graves far north of the wall;
silver poplars, how they whisper and sigh;
pine and cypress flank the broad lane.
Beneath them, the ancient dead.
black black there in their long night,
sunk in sleep beneath the Yellow Springs;
a thousand years pass but they never wake.
Times of heat and cold in unending succession,
but the years Heaven gives us are like

morning dew.
Man's life is brief as a sojourn;
his years lack the firmness of metal or stone.
Ten thousand ages come and go
but sages and wise men discover no cure.
Some seek long life in fasts and potions;
many end by poisoning themselves.
Far better to drink fine wine,
to clothe ourselves in soft white silk!

Thank you and goodbye.